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# **Blood Sacrifice and Moroccan Witchcraft Rituals: Gnawa, Hamadsha, and Treasure Hunters**

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## **Abstract**

In present-day Morocco, witchcraft still plays a major role in the lives of many people, mainly the poorly educated among them. The use of blood is essential in witchcraft practices, inasmuch as it is the enticing sacrifice that is bestowed upon the supernatural entities. In the context at hand, blood sacrifice takes place on more than one occasion, and is practiced amidst witchcraft rituals wherein the fusion of the temporal realm with the spiritual one is pivotal. Underneath the practice's layers lies a sundry system of beliefs which has stemmed from various historical and cultural backgrounds. Nevertheless, blood sacrifice remains an ostracized subject matter as is the practice of witchcraft in an Islamic country. This paper explores the cases wherein the sacrificial rites occur, and emphasizes the reconfigurations they have gone through to conform to the Moroccan cultural and social status quo. Next, it scrutinizes the significance of blood as a miraculous substance without which the sacrificial ceremonies would not be brought to completion. In fact, these ceremonies vary from conciliatory to healing rites, inasmuch as they are contingent upon the practitioners' intentions and objectives. In this respect, the paper studies the cases of the Gnawa and Hamadsha sects as well as the Treasure Hunters. For the sake of earning the spirits' blessing and curing different diseases, Moroccans engage in witchcraft practices at the kernel of which prevails blood sacrifice as the indispensable rite.

## ملخص

لا يزال يلعب السحر والشعوذة دوراً أساسياً في حياة العديد من المغاربة وخاصة ذوي الأقل تعليماً منهم. و يعتبر الدم ضرورياً في ممارسات الشعوذة حيث أنه التضحية التي تجذب الكيانات الخارقة للطبيعة. في السياق الحالي، تتم التضحية بالدم في أكثر من مناسبة، وتمارس ضمن طقوس السحر حيث يكون اندماج العالم الزمني مع العالم الروحي محورياً. يعزى مصدر هذه الطقوس إلى مجموعة متنوعة من المعتقدات التي نشأت من خلفيات تاريخية وثقافية مختلفة. ومع ذلك، فلا تزال التضحية بالدم موضوعاً منبوذاً كما هو الحال بالنسبة إلى موضوع ممارسة السحر في بلد إسلامي. و بالتالي فتستكشف هذه الدراسة الحالات التي تحدث فيها الطقوس القربانية حيث تركز على عمليات إعادة التشكيل التي مروا بها ليتوافقوا مع الوضع الثقافي والاجتماعي الحالي للمغرب. و تدقق أيضاً في أهمية الدم باعتباره مادة مقدسة والتي بدونها لن يتم تحقيق أهداف هذه المراسم القربانية. في الواقع، تختلف هذه الاحتفالات باختلاف نوايا الممارسين التي تشمل أهدافاً استرضائية أو شفائية. في هذا الصدد، يدرس هذا البحث حالات طوائف كناوة وحمادشة بالإضافة إلى الباحثين عن الكنوز. من أجل كسب بركة الأرواح وعلاج مختلف الأمراض، يمارس المغاربة الشعوذة والتي تسود فيها التضحية بالدم باعتباره طقس لا غنى عنه.

## **Abstrait**

Dans le Maroc actuel, la sorcellerie joue encore un rôle majeur dans la vie de nombreuses personnes, principalement parmi celles qui ont un faible niveau d'instruction. L'utilisation du sang est essentielle dans les pratiques de sorcellerie, dans la mesure où c'est le sacrifice alléchant qui est accordé aux entités surnaturelles. Dans le contexte présent, le sacrifice du sang a lieu à plus d'une occasion et est pratiqué au milieu de rituels de sorcellerie dans lesquels la fusion des deux mondes temporel et spirituel est essentielle. L'origine de ces rituels est attribuée à une variété de croyances issues de différents contextes historiques et culturels. Néanmoins, le sacrifice du sang reste un sujet ostracisé, tout comme la pratique de la sorcellerie dans un pays Islamique. Cette monographie explore les cas où les rites sacrificiels se produisent et souligne les reconfigurations qu'ils ont subies pour se conformer au statu quo culturel et social Marocain. Ensuite, elle examine la signification du sang en tant que substance miraculeuse sans laquelle les cérémonies sacrificielles ne seraient pas menées à terme. En fait, ces cérémonies varient du rituel de conciliation au rituel de guérison, dans la mesure où elles dépendent des intentions et des objectifs des pratiquants. À cet égard, la monographie étudie les cas des sectes Gnawa et Hamadsha ainsi que celui des Chasseurs de Trésors. Afin de gagner la bénédiction des entités spirituelles et de guérir différentes maladies, les Marocains s'engagent dans des pratiques de sorcellerie au cœur desquelles le sacrifice du sang est considéré un rite indispensable.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to acknowledge with pride my interminable gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Mohammed Ezroura. He was there to direct and redirect me through the curves and detours of this arduous yet rewarding path of research. Had it not been for his unwavering support, assistance, and dedicated involvement, this dissertation would have never been conveniently accomplished. I have been extremely lucky to be not only among his supervisees, but also his student for three enriching years.

## **Dedication**

*I dedicate my monograph*

*To my mother whose unequivocal love blooms my universe, my blessing, bliss,  
and light in the dark maze of life.*

*To my father who, in me, unquestionably believes, my hero, supporter, and  
epitome of strength.*

*To my sisters, my spring of euphoria, Laila, Wiam, and Soulaima, three petals  
from the blossom of my heart.*

*To Nour El Houda whose cherished amity marked beautiful eight hundred and  
thirty six days, as yet, of my life.*

## Introduction

Blood and witchcraft are inextricably correlated to one another. Deemed to have a magical power, blood plays an essential role in witchcraft. It is strongly present in multiple magical rituals and ceremonies being the optimum offering to saints and supernatural spirits. These rituals resulted from the amalgamation of multiple cultural and religious legacies that contributed in constructing their current form. In fact, understanding the present-day superstitious practices requires putting them under scrutiny to unveil the circumstances that marked their configuration.

This monograph examines the paramountcy of blood in various Moroccan witchcraft practices. Being an Islamic country does not inhibit Morocco from believing in, and practicing, witchcraft which is in essence strictly forbidden by Islam. Notwithstanding its prohibition, it is a cultural phenomenon deeply rooted in Moroccans' traditions and beliefs. In Islam, the use of blood is not permissible apart from some exceptions which come to pass in dire necessities only. However, the Moroccan populace engages in several rituals wherein blood serves as a sacrifice for the spirits seeking their divine blessing, called *Baraka*, and aspiring for mitigation of their diseases. The spirits are referred to as the *Jinn* in the Moroccan culture. They are invisible creatures endowed with paranormal abilities and strongly feared by Moroccans, inasmuch as they can possess and harm people. Moroccans, consequently, offer them blood which they are fond of in multiple occasions. This paper attempts, therefore, to discern three case studies which are Gnawa, Hamadsha, and Treasure Hunters. It analyzes the historical, religious, and ethnic parameters accountable for the complexity of these rituals wherein a fine line distinguishes between the temporal realm and that of the supernatural beings.



The first chapter in this paper analyzes the general historical background of witchcraft in Islam and in Morocco. It starts by attempting to draw a link between the practice and the evil spirits, referred to as the *Jinn*, through observing evidences from the Holy Qur'an and other works in this vein. In this regard, there is the temporal realm of humans and that of the spirits; practicing witchcraft entails, therefore, the interconnectedness of the two realms. The general ruling of this blasphemous practice in Islam is strict prohibition. It is deemed amongst the most unforgivable sins which results in not only the practitioner's torment in the Hereafter, but also during his/her life. In this regard, Islam provides ways of treating any witchcraft that might be used against a Muslim. The essential precaution is reinforcing one's relationship with *Allah* and reciting His name before performing any action. Next, it ventures to explore the invisible realm of the *Jinn* who are endowed with supernatural abilities. This latter is the source wherefrom Moroccans' fear stems believing that these entities are dangerous and harmful. This belief paves the way towards practicing witchcraft, which is deeply entrenched in the Moroccan culture, with the intention of appeasing the spirits' wrath.

The second chapter examines the significance of blood in Islam and Morocco, and displays its prominence in magical practices. Blood is a filthy substance that Islam forbids to drink or use in superstitious rites. However, instances of dire needs emerged wherein the use of blood is permissible. It, afterwards, scrutinizes the perception of blood in the Moroccan culture that is linked to two concepts, which are purity and impurity. In this respect, the pure blood is that which appears in the night of the woman's marriage after her first copulation with her husband. As for the impure blood, it is that of menstruation or the afterbirth. In the course of examination, the chapter displays the paramountcy of blood in

Moroccan witchcraft rituals. It is, in fact, the main offering to the supernatural entities for conciliatory objectives or during healing ceremonies.

Having laid the ground for illustrations, the third chapter attempts to investigate the first instance of blood sacrifice in a Moroccan ceremony, which is the Gnawa sect's *Lila*. The chapter starts by presenting an overview apropos Gnawa's historical background. The sect is a group of ritual musicians who were brought to Morocco as Sub-Saharan African slaves. Without relinquishing their witchcraft rituals, they succeeded in uplifting their social status from being a marginalized minority into a famous musical group. The chapter, next, explores the stages the Lila ceremony goes through. It displays the musicians and their instruments which are indispensable to the success of the ceremony. It also examines the set of spirits the sect deals with as well as their specific colors. Then, it explores the most essential stage in the ceremony at the core of which lies blood sacrifice. In this regard, the possessed people must held sacrificial ceremonies wherein blood is bestowed upon the spirits to appease them and fulfill their needs.

The fourth chapter tries to explore the phenomenon of sainthood as well as to determine the significance of the persona of a Saint in the Moroccan culture. The case study examined therein is that of the Hamadsha brotherhood who, similarly to Gnawa, holds sacrificial and healing ceremonies to cure spirit-possession and to gain the saint's *Baraka*. In this vein, a pilgrimage is held in their founding saints' honor, which is Sidi Ali. Music is an essential component in their ceremonies without which this latter would not succeed. The chapter displays bloodletting as being of vital importance during the healing ceremonies. In fact, the spirits demand both animal and human blood in order to fulfill the patients' urges.

The fifth and final chapter scrutinizes the third instance wherein blood sacrifice plays an essential role which is sacrificing Zouhri children's blood to unveil the location of buried treasures. The chapter starts by attempting to enumerate the characteristics of the so-called Zouhri children and draw a link between them and the world of witchcraft. Next, it ventures to provide an explanation to the children's multiple abductions. In this regard, the treasure hunters blindly believe in the legend that fortunes are guided by a set of spirits that only a Zouhri's blood, if sacrificed for them, would unveil their whereabouts. It, afterwards, lists some testimonies of occurred, or attempted to occur, abductions. Therefore, a perpetual fear of being kidnapped and murdered is engendered in the children's life as a result of this legend.

## Chapter I: Witchcraft in Islam: A Historical Background

### A. Witchcraft in Islam

Witchcraft oversteps the borders of acceptable practices in Islam. In his article "The Jinn and Human Sickness," Abu'l Mundhir states that "witchcraft is based on hidden matters which may be learned; some of it is real and emanates from evil souls in cooperation with evil spirits."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, witchcraft is forbidden, inasmuch as its practitioners seek the help of evil spirits, also called the Jinn. Aisha Stacey claims that these spirits along with "Satan [are worshipped] as lords besides God."<sup>2</sup> The Qur'an contains verses that affirm the reality of witchcraft and evil spirits. Laughlin argues that "Islamic religious beliefs tend to explain a realm of the unknown and unseen within cosmology."<sup>3</sup> Out of this realm stems the relation of interconnectedness between spirits and humans. Being affected with witchcraft or sorcery is a disease amongst others that humans could be prone to. Stacey states that "God does not send a disease for which there is no cure" (Sorcery in Islam, 4). Islamic ways of treating witchcraft vary depending on the situation. Yet, reciting verses of the Qur'an is required in the treatment, for the evil spirits strongly fear the words of God.

#### 1. Ruling on Witchcraft in Islam

Witchcraft is proscribed by the Islamic law. The Islamic perspective about Allah is that His wisdom lies underneath the layers of the prohibition of any practice. Humans cannot fathom this wisdom, yet are required to believe in it. Thus, the forbidding of witchcraft thwarts its serious damaging consequences for the individuals and the community (Aisha Stacey, "Sorcery in Islam," 1). Many doubt the existence of the supernatural, the

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<sup>1</sup> Ameen Abu'l Mundhir K. I., *The Jinn and Human Sickness: Remedies in the Light of the Qur'aan and Sunnah* (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2005), 178.

<sup>2</sup> Aisha Stacey, "Sorcery in Islam," *IslamReligion.com* (2012), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Vivian Laughlin, "A Brief Overview of al Jinn within Islamic Cosmology and Religiosity," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 11.1 (2015), 1.

unseen, and the practice of witchcraft that deals with evil spirits. In fact, according to Islamic beliefs, witchcraft does exist because it is cited in the Qur'an. In his article "The Ruling on Magic," Ibn Baaz cites a verse from the Qur'an (Al-Baqarah: 102) that says:

. . . And from the (angels) people learn that by which they cause separation between man and his wife, but they could not thus harm anyone except by Allaah's Leave. And they learn that which harms them and profits them not. And indeed they knew that the buyers of it (magic) would have no share in the Hereafter. . . .<sup>4</sup>

This verse holds an earnest warning for those who practice any kind of witchcraft. This latter could indeed separate a married couple and bring about other harmful results. The verse points out also the great loss in this life and the Hereafter that emanates from learning and practicing magic (Abdul Azeez, "The Ruling on Magic," 6). Ibn Qudaamah argues that witchcraft actually exists and entails bad consequences such as killing or causing sickness. He also claims that some witchcraft may prevent a man from having intercourse with his wife.<sup>5</sup> The practitioners of witchcraft consider no boundary; they do not hesitate when harming any creature or committing any immoral actions.<sup>6</sup> Some claim that there is a white magic which is not harmful. It serves benign purposes which give the impression that it is a permissible type of magic. However, as Stacey puts it, "[m]agic is magic no matter what colour is used to describe it."<sup>7</sup> Witchcraft includes fortunetelling that is also strictly forbidden by Islam. Allah's messenger Muhammed (Peace be upon him) said: "Whoever goes for a fortune teller and believes what he says has nothing to do with what Allah revealed to Muhammad, and whoever goes to him and does not believe him, his prayers will

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<sup>4</sup> Abdul Azeez Ibn Baaz, "The Ruling on Magic and Fortunetelling," *d1.islamhouse.com*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Ameen Abu'l Mundhir, *The Jinn and Human Sickness*, 183-184.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 192.

<sup>7</sup> Aisha Stacey, "Sorcery in Islam," 5.

not be accepted for forty days.”<sup>8</sup> Fortune tellers or witchcraft practitioners are not to be visited no matter what the reason could be. They are “disbelievers and misguided if they claim the knowledge of the unseen.”<sup>9</sup> Some people visit them under the pretext of treating witchcraft by means of witchcraft itself. However, Islam forbids the use of witchcraft for whatsoever reason. Ibn Baaz notes that “[Allah] did not place cures in anything which He prohibited.”<sup>10</sup> The latter claim implies the presence of permissible ways of treating witchcraft, insofar as the reliance is utterly on Allah.

## **2. Islamic Ways of Treating Witchcraft**

Righteous Muslims who have strong faith and belief in Allah cannot be affected by witchcraft, “apart from a few mild symptoms.” The Muslim should, thus, strengthen his faith that mitigates the fear of anyone other than Allah. He can take another precaution that is “divinely-prescribed” (Ameen Abu’l Mundhir, 206). It is reciting supplications, also called Adkhar, on a daily basis.<sup>11</sup> These supplications are the Muslim’s weapon against witchcraft and its harmful effects. They fill Muslims’ hearts, insofar as the evil spirits cannot overpower them. Nevertheless, if Allah allows the occurrence of this harm, ways of treatment are to be taken into account.

According to Stacey, evil spirits strongly fear the Qur’an because it represents the unaltered words of the Almighty God. Therefore, reciting them builds a shield and a refuge wherein the sick person draws himself closer to God (Stacey, “Sorcery in Islam,” 5). Some claim that undoing a spell requires casting another spell. However, Allah’s Messenger said that witchcraft is the work of Shaytan, Satan in Arabic.<sup>12</sup> There are chapters and verses in

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<sup>8</sup> Cited in Ameen Abu’l Mundhir, 202.

<sup>9</sup> Abdul Azeez Ibn Baaz , “The Ruling on Magic and Fortunetelling,” 3.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Abdul Azeez Ibn Baaz, 208.

<sup>12</sup> Muhammad Saalih Al Munajjid, “It Is Not Permissible to Treat Witchcraft with Witchcraft,” *islamaqa.info* (2006), 1.

the Qur'an recited purposefully to remove the effects of witchcraft and evict the spirits. The act of reciting them is known as the "Ruqyah"<sup>13</sup> among Islamic believers. It includes reciting some verses from the following chapters: Al Baqarah, Al A'raf, Yoonus, Taha, Al Kafirun, and Al Ikhlass.<sup>14</sup> Another crucial verse is the 255<sup>th</sup> from Al Baqarah called Al Kursiy. Stacey explains that "[t]his verse is known as the greatest verse in Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad said that whoever recited this verse at night would be protected until morning and whoever recited it in the morning would be protected until nightfall."<sup>15</sup> As the prior citation makes lucid, this verse is crucial not only to treat witchcraft, but also to protect oneself from it.

## **B. Jinn in Islam**

The realm of the unseen is demystified by Islam and explained as "the world of the Jinn." ("The World of the Jinn," 1). It is a world parallel to that of Humans. Their existence has been a polemic matter amongst scholars, for they are invisible. In this vein, the Qur'an emphasizes their nature: "Indeed We created man from dried clay of black smooth mud. And we created the Jinn before that from the smokeless flame of fire."<sup>16</sup> This verse highlights the different substances whereby these two kinds of creations were made. However, they are not entirely dissimilar. Like humans, the Jinn are required to worship Allah. They can be either believers or disbelievers. God says in his Holy Book: "I did not create the Jinn and mankind except to worship Me."<sup>17</sup> The adjacency of the Jinn and humans in this verse implies their inevitable similarity; in fact, they are both Allah's creations.

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<sup>13</sup> Ameen Abu'l Mundhir, 213.

<sup>14</sup> Muhammad Saalih Al Munajjid, "Ways of Treating Magic," *islamaqa.info* (2000), 2.

<sup>15</sup> Aisha Stacey, 4.

<sup>16</sup> The Holy Qur'an (15 : 26-27).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, (51 :56).

## 1. Nature of the Jinn

When reading the Holy Qur'an, the Jinn are depicted as invisible creatures made of fire. The reason behind the existence of believers and disbelievers among them can be traced to the story of Ibliss, the chief of the evil spirits.<sup>18</sup> He is an angel who refused to obey Allah, insofar as he has fallen from His mercy.<sup>19</sup> Henceforth, his function as well as that of his followers has been leading humans astray. The scary nature of the Jinn stems from various internalized ideas and beliefs about them. Some are taught by Islam, while others are disseminated across cultures. Islamic beliefs convey the idea of the unseen within the realm of the Jinn (Abu'l Mundhir, "The Jinn and Human Sickness," 34). Abu'l Mundhir claims that people's fascination with this realm "stem[s] from primitive beliefs that grew from people's fear of natural forces. Some are a reflection of human thoughts and hidden desires. Some comes from myths and fables and stories made up by soothsayers, witches and charlatans to deceive their weak-minded victims."<sup>20</sup> This realm is perceived as the supernatural within cosmology. In fact, the supernatural abilities of the Jinn remain the origin of human's fear. This latter grows further when considering the fact that they live among humans. "They eat and drink, they marry, have children and they die . . . They will be present with mankind on the Day of Judgement and will either go to Paradise or Hell."<sup>21</sup>

## 2. Abilities of the Jinn

Even though humans' world is similar to that of the Jinn, the unshakable reality remains the supernatural abilities of the latter kind. The evil disbelievers among the Jinn misuse their abilities with the aim of fulfilling the objectives of Ibliss. Laughlin argues that

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<sup>18</sup> Raphael Chijioke Njoku, *Culture and Customs of Morocco* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2006), 28.

<sup>19</sup> Ismail Orchida, "The Jinn: An Equivalent to Evil in 20<sup>th</sup> Century," *Magic and the Supernatural* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2012), 16.

<sup>20</sup> Ameen Abu'l Mundhir, 34.

<sup>21</sup> "The World of the Jinn," *missionislam.com* (2009), 2.



they harm humans “through body possession, and it is not only humans who can be possessed, but also animals, trees, and other objects. By possessing people or objects [,] evil jinn hope to cause people to worship others besides God, which is one of the worst offenses a person can commit.”<sup>22</sup> These abilities were given to them purposefully by Allah as a test. “If they oppress others with them, they will be held accountable.”<sup>23</sup> The evil spirits have the ability to imbue humans’ minds and hearts with misleading ideas so as to stray them from the right path (Umar Sulaiman, *The World of the Jinn and Devils*, 123). Another ability was stated by Rothberg as he notes that the “Jinn are able to move between their world and ours, while humans cannot perform this task.”<sup>24</sup> The endowments of the Jinn have always been a fertile ground for different tales and fantasies.

### **C. Witchcraft in Morocco**

In Morocco, witchcraft is predominately depicted as the ability to use supernatural techniques to cause harm or acquire wealth at the expense of others.<sup>25</sup> The belief in it is highly widespread in modern Morocco. Witchcraft is a flourishing business whose clients are blinded by their desperate desires. Its practitioners are called witchdoctors. They are known for their miraculous achievements because of which they became locally and internationally famous.<sup>26</sup> In present-day Morocco, a great number of people still naively resort to witchcraft whenever they fail to bear with the harsh realities around them. In fact, Feriali argues that there are shops where faunal and floral elements can be found all over the country. These elements are intended to be used in the ingestible type of witchcraft recipes seeking emotional and behavioral control over individuals (Kamal Feriali, “Music-

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<sup>22</sup> Vivian Laughlin, “A Brief Overview of al Jinn,” 74.

<sup>23</sup> “The World of the Jinn,” 2.

<sup>24</sup> Cited in Vivian Laughlin, 70.

<sup>25</sup> Boris Gershman, “Witchcraft Beliefs as a Cultural Legacy of the Atlantic Slave Trade: Evidence from Two Continents,” *Researchgate.com* (2018), 1.

<sup>26</sup> Houda El Mouatassim, “Witchcraft : A Stigma in the Reputation of Morocco,” *Moroccoworldnews.com* (2018), 2.

Induced Spirit Possession,” 40). Another type is the esoteric witchcraft which is based upon some elements like charts, talismans, and grave dirt. This type functions via the agency of the Jinn that is mostly given the credit for the effect of magic (Ibid, 40). The journey of witchcraft in Morocco has been colored with persistence, adaptation, and reconfiguration since the pre-Islamic era up to the present day.

### **1. Historical Origins of Witchcraft in Morocco**

Before the coming of Islam, the indigenous beliefs of Moroccans emanated from Animism. The latter is the religious belief that plants, inanimate objects, and natural phenomena have spirits.<sup>27</sup> These elements were worshiped because of the unfathomable peculiarities about them (Oussama Benayad, 66). Even after the Islamic conquest of North Africa, folk Muslims became doctrinally Muslim but remained animists in practice.<sup>28</sup> For further scrutiny about the origins of witchcraft, the Pew Forum of religion and public life conducted an empirical study in 2008-2009. It reveals that the Atlantic slave trade impacted the beliefs of the severely-raided among the representatives of the ethnic groups (Gershman, 2). They are the more likely to believe in witchcraft today. The slaves, back then, explained their miserable state in the unknown land as being the victims of acts of witchcraft performed by their owners (Gershman, 3). As far as the Slave trade reached Morocco, these beliefs became, and have remained, ubiquitous among people. According to Elaine Hagopian, “Islam was embraced in Morocco specifically due to and in its mystical form, as its integration was not difficult and did not entail major social changes that would have been far-fetched and resisted in the Moroccan context” (Oussama Benayad, 37).

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<sup>27</sup> Oussama Benayad, “Animal Sacrifice in Morocco: Between Islam and Pagan Rituals,” *Academia.edu* (2018), 70.

<sup>28</sup> Rick Love, “Power Encounter among Folk Muslims: An Essential Key of the Kingdom,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 13.4 (1996), 193.

Indeed, if it were not for its “mystical garment”<sup>29</sup>, Islam would neither have been able to permeate the Moroccan system of beliefs, nor to adapt to it. In addition, two of the ultimate reasons behind the firm current existence of witchcraft in Morocco are illiteracy and poverty. It is illegal and deemed anti-Islamic. Nevertheless, ignorant and destitute people who cannot afford health counseling or mental therapy resort to witchcraft.<sup>30</sup> In order to be socially accepted, David Hart claims that it is called a “traditional medical curative.”<sup>31</sup> These remedial techniques are deeply rooted, inasmuch as, during the French colonial era, the Western medicine failed to completely displace them. Hart argues that they “only succeeded, at best, in putting them in cold storage” (David Hart, 187). In fulfilling whatsoever function, witchcraft never ceased to exist in Morocco; it became a collective belief among the populace.

## **2. Witchcraft: A collective belief**

There is a shared belief among Moroccans that lies in the existence of invisible forces. Some claim the ability to master these forces through witchcraft. In fact, they claim, besides the prior, that they possess a certain religious authority.<sup>32</sup> This ostensible declaration holds underneath its surface a profound mingling between the sacred and the profane. James Shotwell explains: “One cannot separate religion from magic by a mere definition. The further we examine the phenomena of religions the more we find them interpenetrated with strains of magic forces . . . the primitive mind certainly never was able

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<sup>29</sup> Moundir Al Amrani, “Significance of Blood in Religion and Magic Ritual in Morocco,” *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 20.3 (2015), 52.

<sup>30</sup> Ailsa Sachdev, “Love and Witchcraft in Morocco,” *Roundearthmedia.org* (2014), 1.

<sup>31</sup> David M. Hart, “Magic, Witchcraft and Sorcery in Morocco: The Sociology of Evans-Pritchard and the Ethnography of Mustapha Akhmisse, M.D.,” *British Society for Middle Eastern Studies* 14.2 (1987), 187.

<sup>32</sup> Rachida Chih, Rev. of *The Calls of Islam : Sufis, Islamists, and Mass Mediation in Urban Morocco*, by Emilio Spadola, *Journal of Islamic Studies* 27.3 (2015), 416.

to distinguish them.”<sup>33</sup> The arrival of Islam was intended to erase traditional local beliefs and assert Islamic specificities (Benayad, 37). However, these beliefs are the pillars of the Moroccan society which the populace uses as a loophole to escape from, and cope with, its living conditions. In this vein, Feriali argues that:

[Moroccan witchcraft] can be best described as a complex repertoire of utilitarian magical practices that bring good, fend evil, or place curses. It intersects with mainstream Islam in that it recognizes the power of the jinn, but differs from it in that it actively mobilizes their power to achieve desired positive or negative ends in human life.<sup>34</sup>

Indeed, there is no dividing line between witchcraft and religion; they are interchangeable.<sup>35</sup> The interaction between them has engendered the Moroccan Islam. The latter represents “the heterogeneous nature of the Moroccan belief system . . . underneath whose surface pre-Islamic beliefs have managed to survive.”<sup>36</sup> Moroccan Islam persisted because of the reconfigurations the Orthodox Islam had been subject to. The aforementioned belief in supernatural forces, namely the Jinn, required the rise of a set of rituals in order to seek their blessing and avoid their potential harm. One of the chief rituals is blood sacrifice that is bestowed upon the Jinn seeking their blessing. Thus, investigating the significance of blood in Morocco is of a considerable importance, as it is at the core of the ritual within which it represents a paramount component.

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<sup>33</sup> Cited in Moundir Al Amrani, 53.

<sup>34</sup> Kamal Feriali, “Music-Induced Spirit Possession Trance in Morocco: Implications for Anthropology and Allied Disciplines,” *University of Florida Digital Collections* (2009), 39.

<sup>35</sup> David Hart, 183.

<sup>36</sup> Oussama Benayad, 13.

## **Chapter II: Significance of Blood: Islam and Moroccan Witchcraft**

Blood is a vital substance which explains its relation to various beliefs. Many cultures around the world correlated blood with particular assumptions and interpretations. In Christianity, the lamb's blood is supposed to be wiped across the doorway to thwart the death of the newborn. It is also the epitome of atonement of sins. In Judaism, it is believed that blood is the source wherefrom stems the animal soul of humans which gives birth to the physical desires. East Asian culture considers also blood as related to desire. They believe that a bleeding nose is a sign of experiencing a sexual desire. This claim stems from the idea that a male's blood pressure rises drastically when he is aroused.<sup>1</sup> Focusing on the Moroccan context, blood, even though prohibited in Islam, still occupies a significant area in Moroccan witchcraft rituals.

### **A. Blood in Islam**

In Islam, the use of blood determines its ruling; it is either accepted or prohibited. The general ruling on bloodletting is prohibition. However, if need be, it is accepted in two cases. Islam permits blood transfusion that serves medical objectives. It is a humanitarian act performed by healthy righteous humans who are greatly rewarded by God. Another permissible act is blood sacrifice for the sake of praising God and showing one's thankfulness and piety. One, however, must be heedful of one's intention in order not to succumb to aspiring protection from any probable evil power instead of merely acknowledging Allah's blessings. Still, in essence, the Islamic view apropos blood is that of being nothing but an embodiment of impurity. It is to be eschewed with the omission of the dire necessities which Allah, being oft-forgiving, renders its usage admissible.

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<sup>1</sup> "Blood" See: Wikipedia.

## 1. Blood Transfusion

Blood is a paramount component without which a human's body cannot function. Because of some lethal diseases, blood ceases to operate accurately which requires blood transfusion. Despite the proscription of bloodletting, Islam permits this case, insofar as it serves mere medical purposes. "Blood transfusion [is legitimized because it] can save a patient's life and limit the complications of severe blood loss."<sup>2</sup> In fact, the blood donor is highly rewarded for rescuing a human being and respecting the sanctity of his soul. This is emphasized in the Holy Qur'an: ". . . whoever kills a soul unless for a soul or for corruption in the land - it is as if he had slain mankind entirely. And whoever saves one - it is as if he had saved mankind entirely."<sup>3</sup> The legitimacy of blood donation has been a polemic amongst Muslim scholars. They ended up resorting to the element of public benefit, also called *Maslaha*. The latter is one of the most useful tools whereby Muslim jurists fill legal lacunae.<sup>4</sup> Public benefit serves promoting ingenious legal views for which the Shari'ah, that is the Islamic Law, holds no reference (Vardit Rispler-Chaim, 2003). Scholars resorted also to another essential principle which states that "necessity makes prohibition lawful."<sup>5</sup> In other words, despite the prohibition of bloodletting, if in dire need, it becomes permissible. There is a *Hadith*<sup>6</sup> that quotes Allah's messenger Muhammad (Peace be upon him) saying: "One Muslim is the brother of another: he neither does him injustice, nor does he ever give him up."<sup>7</sup> This Hadith sheds light on the responsibility that lies upon the Muslim's shoulders

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<sup>2</sup> Muhammad Zahid and Zainab Amin, "Blood Transfusion: A Critical Review in Light of Shariah," *Tahdib al Afkar* (July-December 2016), 29.

<sup>3</sup> The Holy Qur'an (5 : 32).

<sup>4</sup> Vardit Rispler-Chaim, "Islamic Medical Ethics in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 15.4 (1989), 204.

<sup>5</sup> Muhammad Zahid, "Blood Transfusion," 32.

<sup>6</sup> *Hadith* is a saying of the Prophet. For further details, see: Wikipedia, "Hadith".

<sup>7</sup> M.H. Al-Khayat, *Health as a Human Right in Islam* (Cairo, Egypt : World Health Organization, 2004): 35.

when another person is in need. By the same token, if a patient suffers from blood deficiency or any disease requiring blood transfusion, the Muslim, if in good health, must donate his blood to help that patient. Granted that bloodletting may be within the accepted bounds of Islam in certain circumstances, blood remains an impure substance that humans are not allowed to use as nourishment.

## **2. Blood Drinking**

Blood is among the substances that Islam considers filthy and impure. Islamic law, thus, prohibits drinking blood or eating animal's meat without being completely drained of its blood. In this respect, Shirazi claims that "the blood of man and every animal whose blood gushes at the time of slaughter is impure."<sup>8</sup> Allah enumerates in His Holy Qur'an the limitations any Muslim should respect as far as food is concerned:

He has forbidden you only the Maitah (dead animals), and blood poured forth, and the flesh of swine, and that which is slaughtered as a sacrifice for others than Allah (or has been slaughtered for idols, on which Allah's Name has not been mentioned while slaughtering). But if one is forced by necessity without willful disobedience nor transgressing due limits, then there is no sin on him. Truly, Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.<sup>9</sup>

As the verse makes lucid, Muslims should not feed on animals whose blood was not drained, inasmuch as this latter is "one of the most evil and unlawful kinds of food that Prophet Muhammad was sent to abolish."<sup>10</sup> The prior reason is grounded on the regulations of animal-slaughtering that were put forward by Islam. In his dissertation, Benayad states that

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<sup>8</sup> Ayatullah Naser Makarem Shirazi, "A Summary of Rulings," *Books on Islam and Muslims* (Madani E-Publications, 2006): 10.

<sup>9</sup> The Holy Qur'an (2: 173). Cited in Moundir Al Amrani, 51.

<sup>10</sup> Tawfeeq Alwaan, "It Is Forbidden to Eat Meat without Draining the Blood," *Majallat Al Da'wah* 1811 (2001), 64.

the animal should be slaughtered with the intention of sacrificing it for no entity other than Allah, and Allah's name must be pronounced upon conducting the act; these regulations serve spiritual purposes.<sup>11</sup> As for medical ones, scholars and doctors considered closely the phrase "poured forth" in the aforementioned verse. They interpreted it as the copiously-flowing blood which the animal should be drained of after the slaughtering. This blood has been subject to microscopic tests that resulted in the fact that "[it] is considered to be the optimum environment for the growth of germs" (Tawfeeq Alwaan, 64). This emphasizes Allah's Wisdom in prohibiting only that which is not beneficial for human beings.

### **3. Blood Sacrifice for Allah**

Many misconceptions are to be explained as far as blood sacrifice for God is concerned. Unlike what Islam urges, some people tend to sacrifice animals and shed their blood for the sake of bloodletting itself. However, the underlying implication of Islam's position towards this ritual is not that of the prior premise. It is rather praising Allah and showing Him gratitude for His sustenance and blessings.<sup>12</sup> Islam demands blood sacrifice in two occasions: The Feast of sacrifice, referred to as *Eid Al-Adha*, and the Feast of childbirth, called *Al Aqiqah*. Indeed, the purpose behind these rituals is not shedding blood, which is in Islam nothing but an emblem of impurity. In essence, it is rather both a way of showing one's abysmal devoutness and gratefulness to Allah, and a type of *Zakah*, meaning charity, since the sacrifice should be shared with the poor (Oussama Benayad, 23). In connection therewith, Allah states in His Holy Book that "[i]t is neither their meat nor their blood that reaches Allah, but it is piety from you that reaches Him. Thus Have We made them subject to you that you may magnify Allah for His Guidance to you. And give glad tidings (O

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<sup>11</sup> Oussama Benayad, "Animal Sacrifice in Morocco," 25.

<sup>12</sup> Moundir Al Amrani, "Significance of Blood in Religion and Magic Rituals," 50.



Muhammad) to the Muhsinun (doers of good).”<sup>13</sup> This verse asserts plainly both the insignificant value of blood and the sought aim behind this practice that is mainly praising God and sharing with the deprived people.

There is, however, another case wherein blood sacrifice takes place. It is that when one's prayers have been brought to completion, or when one has been bestowed a blessing such as wealth or offspring. Or else, the sacrifice occurs if one's life has been spared or saved from a fatal accident or disease.<sup>14</sup> However, this case has always been subject to skepticism and scrutiny. Islam, in fact, does not permit sacrificial rites with the aim of warding off that which was decreed by Allah.<sup>15</sup> Hence, the challenge grows ampler to elicit the difference between the acceptable and the forbidden, inasmuch as people's intentions are opaque and cannot be authentically uttered. For instance, one may hold a *Sadaqa*, which is offering a sacrifice, with the intention of showing gratefulness to Allah, but may as well consider it an act to forefend evil or ill omens. The underlying intention of the sacrifice bestowed therein is, therefore, forbidden by Islam.

## **B. Blood in the Moroccan Culture**

The perception of blood in the Moroccan popular culture vacillates between purity and impurity. The concept of impurity is linked to two phenomena wherein blood flows naturally: menstruation blood and that lost during and after childbirth.<sup>16</sup> In fact, this blood is considered to be polluting, filthy, and poisonous. This idea stems from the female's inability to perform their religious duties in accordance with the Islamic view apropos this blood. Moreover, personal hygiene is highly required, insofar as popular beliefs claim that

<sup>13</sup> The Holy Qur'an (22 :37). Cited in Ibid, 50.

<sup>14</sup> Oussama Benayad, 24.

<sup>15</sup> Muhammed Al Munajjid, "Is It Permissible to Slaughter an Animal with the Intention of Offering a Sacrifice," 1.

<sup>16</sup> Josep Lluís Mateo Dieste, *Health and Ritual in Morocco: Conception of the Body and Healing Practices*, trans. Martin Beagles (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 43.

menstrual and maternal blood serves magical purposes.<sup>17</sup> As for the concept of purity, it is believed to be associated with the female's virginity blood that should come into sight on the night of her marriage. Therefore, social pressure is exerted upon females, inasmuch as this red substance determines their sexual chastity, honor, and purity. In order for the reasons that underlie these perceptions to be unveiled, the cultural signifying beliefs that have engendered them are to be put under scrutiny.

### **1. Virginity Blood**

A Moroccan traditional proverb states that the beauty of men is in their shoulders and of women in their purity.<sup>18</sup> Purity of the Moroccan females is associated with their virginity blood that appears after the rupture of the hymen on the night of their wedding (Youssef, "Men versus Women Virginity," 1). Nitzan Ziv states that "[s]uch blood loss had been required in some cultures to prove that the woman is a virgin at marriage so a blood-stained cloth would be given to the groom's family on the wedding night to verify the bride's pure state."<sup>19</sup> By preserving their virginity, Moroccan women do not only preserve their purity, but also uphold their family's honor. The concept of honor is crucial amongst Moroccans, inasmuch as it is deemed the affirmation of status within society which gives them a sense of worth. Without this latter, Moroccans cannot engage in social practices without having their heads bow in shame.<sup>20</sup> Virginity blood does not represent solely honor; it also signifies a transition point in the life of the female. In fact, the spilling of virginal blood identifies a

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<sup>17</sup> Carla Makhoulf Obermeyer, "Pluralism and Pragmatism: Knowledge and Practice of Birth in Morocco," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 14.2 (2000), 186,187.

<sup>18</sup> Youssef El Hamdaouy, "Men versus Women Virginity: The Hypocrisy of Moroccan Society," (31 October 2014), 2.

<sup>19</sup> Nitzan Ziv, "Interpreting their Blood: The Contradictions of approaches to Menstruation through Religion Education, Ritual and Culture in Rabat, Morocco," *Independent Study Project Collection* 4.1 (2006), 29.

<sup>20</sup> Theresa Thao Pham, "The Certificate of Virginity: Honor, Marriage and Moroccan Female Immigration," *Columbia University*, PhD diss. (2011): 4.

passage into fulfilling the role of a wife and a future mother (Josep Dieste, "Health and Ritual in Morocco," 146). The perception of virginity blood is a male construction, insofar as it favors the patriarchal structure of the Moroccan society. While virginal blood is conceived as an embodiment of purity, the concept of impurity is, on the other hand, associated with menstrual and maternal blood.

## **2. Menstrual and Maternal Blood**

In Moroccan society, women have always been regarded as unclean beings because of their menstrual and maternal blood. Westermarck claims that "[m]enstruous blood is due to Hawwa's eating of the forbidden fruit in Paradise, which was transformed into such blood."<sup>21</sup> This implies that menstrual blood is regarded as the punishment for committing that sin, and the reason because of which women are demeaned by the patriarchal society to which they belong. In his book *Health and Ritual in Morocco*, Josep Dieste argues that "[m]enstrual blood was classified by the texts as one of the substances which generate impurity."<sup>22</sup> The Prophet Mohammad said to his wife Aisha: "Give up the prayer when your menses begin and when it has finished, wash the blood off your body (take a bath) and start praying."<sup>23</sup> The prophet enjoined his wife specifically and women generally to abstain from practicing the religious obligations until the end of the menstruating period. This command was misunderstood, insofar as people presumed that menstruation is linked to dirtiness and impurity. Similarly, the blood flowing during and after childbirth is also related to the concept of impurity. This stems from the childbirth's danger for the woman's life as it can bring about either excessive bleeding or retention of bad blood that is poisonous. Therefore,

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<sup>21</sup> Edward Westermarck, "Various Magical Influences and Omens – Dreams," In *Ritual and Belief in Morocco* (London: Macmillan Company, 1926): 4,5.

<sup>22</sup> Josep Lluís Mateo Dieste, *Health and Ritual in Morocco*, 76.

<sup>23</sup> Moundir Al Amrani, 51.

the end of postpartum is referred to as *Safa*, meaning literally clearness.<sup>24</sup> According to Dieste, menstrual and maternal blood are as associated with impurity as are they with dangerousness. This latter is attributed to them because they are used among the ingredients of various magical potions including love and curative treatments.<sup>25</sup> In fact, blood is a crucial component in Moroccan witchcraft.

### **C. Blood and Moroccan Witchcraft**

Moroccans believe that blood attracts the Jinn which explains its significant presence in witchcraft. Regardless the religious rulings on the use of blood mentioned hitherto, this substance preserves a conspicuous status in magical practices. In fact, maternal and menstrual blood are not the only types used to serve magical purposes. According to Dieste, "[t]he blood of a person who has died in an accident or been murdered is considered especially dangerous and can be used to bring about the death of a child" (*Health and Ritual in Morocco*, 43). Blood is the main offering to the Jinn, inasmuch as the latter is fond of it. By sacrificing blood, Moroccans seek to earn their *Baraka*, which is blessing, aspire to appease them, or aim to heal diseases or possession. In fact, there are healing ceremonies wherein blood constitutes the substantial element which lies at the core of the ritual.

#### **1. Bloodletting for Conciliatory Purposes**

According to Moroccan beliefs, blood is deeply believed to have supernatural powers. In this respect, Al Amrani states that "[t]he significance attributed to blood in ritual sacrifice originates from its power as a 'divine sanguinary substance'." <sup>26</sup> Indeed, blood has always been associated with witchcraft and magical practices, insofar as it is the main offering to the spirits. Moroccans fear this latter insomuch that it is essential to propitiate them with

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<sup>24</sup> Carla Makhoul Obermeyer, "Pluralism and Pragmatism," 186.

<sup>25</sup> Josep Lluís Mateo Dieste, *Health and Ritual in Morocco*, 78.

<sup>26</sup> Moundir Al Amrani, 54.

blood sacrifices beseeching acceptance, peace, and avoidance of possession. In this vein, Boddy argues that “[p]ossession . . . is a broad term referring to an integration of spirit and matter, force or power and corporeal reality, in a cosmos where the boundaries between an individual and her environment are acknowledged to be permeable, flexibly drawn, or at least negotiable [sic].”<sup>27</sup> Moroccans are convinced that their existence is shared with these creatures, inasmuch as they are referred to as “the owners of the place” (Moundir Al Amrani, 55). In order to avoid any resentment and hostility, Moroccans offer them their preferable substance, which is blood. In the context of the Feast of sacrifice, for instance, Moroccans derive benefit from the opportunity to bestow their sacrifice not only upon Allah, but upon the spirits also, which they presumably worship equally. Westermarck states that

[w]hen the Moors build a house or dig a well, they always take precautions against gnun. The Angera people put some salt and wheat and an egg in the ground, and kill a goat on the threshold of the new house; otherwise, they say, the children of the house would be stillborn or would soon die. In various parts of Morocco some animal—a goat, or a sheep, or a cock, sometimes a bullock—is killed both when the foundation of a house is laid, and when the house is ready, or nearly ready for occupation. In the latter case the sacrifice takes place on the threshold . . .<sup>28</sup>

This extract emphasizes the profound belief in spirits amongst Moroccans. Moreover, blood is an element deemed to be able to transmit the *Baraka* of the Jinn (Josep Dieste, 43). This latter is considered to have healing characteristics if conferred the required sacrifices. For instance, some people dry animal’s blood and use it as medicine for those who are struck by

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<sup>27</sup> Janice Boddy, “Spirit Possession Revisited: Beyond Instrumentality,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 23 (1994), 407.

<sup>28</sup> Cited in Moundir Al Amrani, 54.

the evil spirits. Blood is, therefore, burned so as the patient inhales its smoke.<sup>29</sup> Discussing the occasions wherein blood sacrifice takes place to serve magical purposes in Morocco entails a discussion about the healing ceremonies in which the ritual prevails.

## **2. Blood Sacrifice in Healing Ceremonies**

The Moroccan healing ceremonies wherein blood sacrifice takes place are conducted among the famous trinity: Gnawa, Hamadsha, and Aissawa. According to Benayad, their forte incorporates trance and mastery of spirits.<sup>30</sup> These ceremonies are held by possessed people who seek to appease the spirits who inhabit them, referred to as *Lmluk*. They are also held by the sick people seeking cure, insofar as the spirits are believed to be granted curative abilities (Benayad, 54). Blood, hence, lies at the heart of the ritual being the substance the ceremony cannot dispense of. It is used as a medium whereby *Lmluk* within the self are awakened and evoked (Ibid, 71). It is mostly animal blood which is sacrificed, yet human's blood can also be bestowed upon the spirits. For instance, the Gnawa sect is known for sacrificing animals' blood, drinking the first drops regarded as the most sacred, and sprinkling it around the possessed. Whereas Hamadsha and Aissawa sects practice more violent acts such as repeatedly slashing away at one's forearm with a butcher's knife, or any other sharp instrument causing excessive flow of blood. The significant prevalence of these rituals within the Moroccan society is attributable to the reconfigurations that common beliefs and practices were subject to after the coming of Islam. This brought about interconnectedness between the religious and the superstitious. The prior consequence can be detected closely in the sacrificial ceremony held among the Gnawa sect, which is called the *Lila*.

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<sup>29</sup> Edward Westermarck, "Rites and Beliefs Connected with the Muhammadan Calendar," in *Ritual and Belief in Morocco*, 122.

<sup>30</sup> Oussama Benayad, 53.

### **Chapter III: Blood Sacrifice in Gnawa Rituals: The “Lila” Ceremony**

Having experienced slavery, the Gnawa brotherhood unleashed their sufferings through their music and spiritual rituals. The Lila ceremony that they hold serves the emancipation of a history of oppression and ill-treatment. Because of the latter, they united with the spirits and performed witchcraft rituals wherein blood plays a major role. In fact, they are notorious for their trance and mastery of spirits. Besides blood sacrifice, the Lila incorporates a juncture wherein spirits are evoked in accordance with their colors and incenses. Another major component during the Lila is music; it cannot succeed without the musicians playing particular musical compositions on their instruments. The cultural image of the Gnawa sect has remained blackened with the stigma of witchcraft and blood sacrifice.

#### **A. History of Gnawa**

The Gnawa sect usually comprises people of Sub-Saharan origins who were brought to Morocco mostly as migrants and slaves. Chouki El Hamel states that “Gnawa are traditionally a mystic order, and this marks their exclusiveness within Islam.”<sup>1</sup> It is due to the latter declaration that this sect has received scant regard in Islamic scholarship. In fact, the Gnawa brotherhood seeks to reach Allah through spiritual and mystic manifestations with the assumption that the divine is extremely powerful for direct connection and personal union (Ibid, 255). Muslim scholars consider these practices contrary to the tenets of Islam. This mystic sect has succeeded in permeating Moroccan culture and society, insomuch as their integration in the social fabric occurred in parallel with that of their faith, pagan beliefs, and music.<sup>2</sup> With respect to music, Christopher Witulski argues that, within it, a historical and cultural memory of forced migration and a history of slavery are embedded and

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<sup>1</sup> Chouki El Hamel, “Constructing a Diasporic Identity: Tracing the Origins of the Gnawa Spiritual Group in Morocco,” *The Journal of African History* 49 (2008), 243.

<sup>2</sup> Moundir Al Amrani, “Significance of Blood,” 55.

preserved.<sup>3</sup> Because of their harsh social conditions, Moroccans strongly needed spiritual escapism. Gnawa music fulfilled their urge which Crapanzano depicted as “a form of transcendence and visceral sort of escapism from the hardships of day-to-day life”.<sup>4</sup> In present-day Morocco, Gnawa altered progressively their social position from being placed in a marginalized status, attributed mainly to their mystic practices, to becoming a not only a musical catering to a variety of tastes, but also widely-known for their witchcraft rituals at the heart of which blood sacrifice prevails.

### **1. Historical Background: The slave Trade**

Gnawa attributes their history to the slave trade. In his article “Constructing a Diasporic Identity,” Chouki El Hamel asserts that “at least since the twelfth century Gnawa means ‘the black people’” (244). In fact, by the end of the sixteenth century, slavery was associated with blackness as a consequence of the increased number of slaves imported from West Africa and transiting toward Europe and America. In this regard, Benayad argues indeed that the slave trade “was amongst the most important trade routes, as war captives and many others were transported, enabling the persistence of slavery which had been prevalent during the pre-Islamic era, and was still at work with the coming of Islam and afterwards”.<sup>5</sup> The slave trade was the dominant aspect that marked the continuity of the relation between Morocco and “black” West Africa.<sup>6</sup> In the late seventeenth century, the Moroccan king back then, Mawlay Isma’il, gave the order of enslaving all black people to create his own army. While gradually manumitted, the freed slaves formed their own

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<sup>3</sup> Christopher Witulski, “Defining and Revising the Gnawa and their Music through Commodification in Local, National, and Global Contexts,” Master Diss. *University of Florida Digital Collections*, 50.

<sup>4</sup> Vincent Crapanzano, *Tuhami: A Portrait of a Moroccan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983): 35.

<sup>5</sup> Oussama Benayad, “Animal Sacrifice In Morocco,” 43.

<sup>6</sup> Chouki El Hamel, 248.



families and communities; they are referred to in the present time as the “Gnawa” sect.<sup>7</sup> Conscious of their otherness and blackness and aspiring to integrate in the Moroccan society, Gnawa converted to Islam. They adopted Bilal as their ancestor and patron saint because he was the first black person to embrace Islam. In fact, Bilal was the personal assistant of the Prophet Mohammad, and the first Muezzin, meaning “caller to prayer”. He was, thus, granted Baraka, a divine blessing, which Gnawa members believe they inherited. Nevertheless, having adopted Islam was not sufficient for the Gnawa sect to relinquish their animist and mystic traditions, inasmuch as they persisted in observing their ritual possession.<sup>8</sup>

## **2. Gnawa Today**

Gnawa have always expressed an ostracized genre of Moroccan culture. However, the sect’s legacy, being a “rich thread woven into the cultural cloth of modern-day Morocco”<sup>9</sup>, engendered a reassessment of their status. In fact, the Gnawa musical world has witnessed a significant leap from performing solely in intimate spheres into highly lucrative festivals, television programs, and recordings.<sup>10</sup> Each year, the Moroccan Ministry of Culture sponsors several non-religious festivals whose prominent purpose is feting the local traditions and the diversity of the national culture.<sup>11</sup> The Essaouira Gnawa Festival of World Music occupies a considerable position amongst these festivals, inasmuch as, since its birth in 1998, it has been free and open to the public (Deborah Kapchan, 58). This led the Gnawa music to attain a degree of “pop” status in the current Moroccan society.<sup>12</sup> In accordance with the contemporary position, Gnawa lost its exclusiveness, insofar as its

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 249.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 248-50.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 260.

<sup>10</sup> Maisie Sum, “Music of the Gnawa of Morocco: Evolving Spaces and Times,” PhD. Diss. *University of British Columbia Library* (Columbia, 2012), 19.

<sup>11</sup> Deborah Kapchan, “The Festive Sacred and the Fetish of Trance,” *Gradhiva* 7 (2008), 56.

<sup>12</sup> Chouki El Hamel, 243.

rituals have been subject to relative changes. It is worth pointing, thus, by way of illustration, at the changes the Lila ceremony has been prone to. The spiritual value of this ritual was belittled, whereas emphasis was devoted to the musical performance. In this vein, Maisie states that “[m]usic performed for the purposes of festivals, parties, or recording sessions bears an aural resemblance to the sacred occasion; however, because they are intended for entertainment, other ritual necessities are normally absent.”<sup>13</sup> For instance, holding an authentic Lila wherein propitiating the spirits with blood sacrifice is paramount has been criticized and met with protest by those who are aware of little about the traditions (Kapchan, 59). As a result, the Lila held no longer its sacred status as it became a mere musical ceremony. The discussion about the Lila entails an elaborate examination of the rituals prevalent therein.

## **B. The Lila Ceremony of Gnawa**

The Lila is a healing ceremony held by the Gnawa sect. Its prominent trait is the amalgamation of both the temporal and spiritual realms. The Lila, also referred to as *Derdba*, means literally “night” in Arabic since it lasts until the dawn. The ceremony is deemed crucial because “the kings of the Jinn descend among the followers of the sect.”<sup>14</sup> As an overture of the ceremony, the Gnawa musical repertoire is played on their distinct instruments. It usually starts with the less intense rhythms which do not bring about trance yet. An inextricable ritual within the ceremony is blood sacrifice which is practiced around the séance of *Ftuh Rahba*. This latter marks the start of invoking the *Mluk* wherein trances come about.<sup>15</sup> According to Maisie Sum, a Lila is considered effective if many trances, upon

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<sup>13</sup> Maisie Sum, 20.

<sup>14</sup> Moundir Al Amrani, 55.

<sup>15</sup> Oussama Benayad, 47.

which the *Baraka* is based, take place.<sup>16</sup> The spirits have their own series of colors which are arranged in the order in pursuit of which these spirits are invoked. In essence, the Lila ceremony serves propitiating the spirits with sacrifices in an ambiance wherein music cannot be dispensed of.

### 1. The Musicians and their Instruments

In his book *Music and Trance*, Rouget declares that “[m]usic is the condition sine qua non of the trance experience.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, music is indispensable to the completion and success of the Lila ceremony. In this respect, Sum claims that “[m]usic which initiates dance is essential for community entertainments and particularly crucial for processing and facilitating trance in the possession portion of the ritual process. It is the key to ritual success.”<sup>18</sup> The Gnawa orchestra comprises a number of musicians whose ranking according to necessity throughout the ceremony reflects the hierarchy of their community. The main musician and leader of the orchestra is the *M’allem* who is also referred to as the master. Another member who is as important as the *M’allem* is the *Moqaddema*. Sum argues that their importance is attributable to their deep knowledge of all sensory symbols associated with the spirits, the ritual processes, and their mystical meanings. They are highly respected, inasmuch as they are believed to be chosen by both the seen and unseen communities; hence, they are granted Baraka as are the spirits.<sup>19</sup> The main three instruments upon which the musicians rely to establish connection with the spiritual realm are: the *Guembri*, also called *Hajhuj* or *Sintir*, *Tbel*, and *Qraqeb* (See Fig. 1, 2, and 3). Elena Morató argues that the fundamental role of these instruments resides in their ability to

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<sup>16</sup> Maisie Sum, 66.

<sup>17</sup> Gilbert Rouget, *Music and Trance: A Theory of the Relations between Music and Possession* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 324.

<sup>18</sup> Maisie Sum, 19.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

transmit knowledge and the social values of the traditional African communities.<sup>20</sup>

Notwithstanding the important role of all the instruments, the *Guembri* per se serves as the “primary invocation to call on the Jinns” (Chouki El Hamel, 253). In this vein, Boubker Gania, who is an old Gnawa master and a native of Essaouira, says:

The guenbri is a crucial instrument in Gnawa rituals. It is through this device that the trance occurs. For this reason the Gnawa do not say ‘they play music’ but they say ‘they call out to [i.e. they request the spirits to appear]’. If there is no guenbri there will be no trance. The guenbri provides the rhythm for the trance. [sic]<sup>21</sup>

As the above testimony plainly displays, the *Guembri*, or *Guenbri*, holds responsible for the success of the trance. Elena Morató depicts it as “the voice that whispers and leads the lament, the evocation and the invocation” (191).

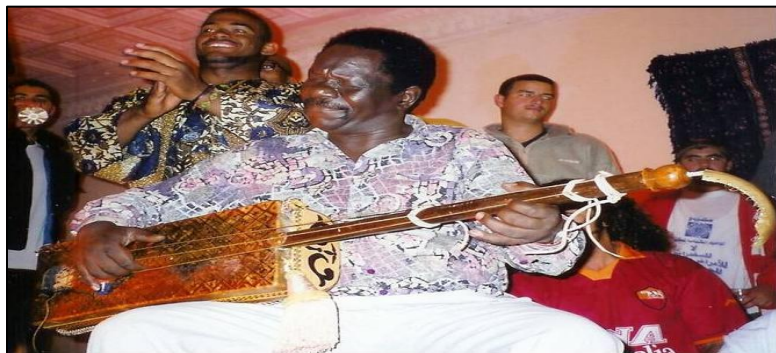


Figure 1: Guembri. (Photograph by Maisie Sum) (© *Ethnomusicology*, 2010, adapted with permission of the Society for Ethnomusicology).<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Elena Morató, “Gnawa: Music and Spirit,” *Iemed8* (2007), 191.

<sup>21</sup> Cited in Chouki El Hamel, 254.

<sup>22</sup> Maisie Sum, 125.



Figure 2: Qraqab.<sup>23</sup>



Figure 3: The Qraqeb and the Tbal.<sup>24</sup>

Through their instruments, the *M'alle*m and the other musicians utilize specific rhythms and melodic portions of their musical repertoire so as to arouse each individual spirit.<sup>25</sup> Alongside the specific music played, invoking the spirits follows an order of colors which is to be examined to unveil the set of spirits Gnawa is associated with.

## 2. Gnawa's Spirits and their Colors

The Gnawa sect works with many spirits who are categorized by a system of

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 125.

<sup>24</sup> Deborah Kapchan, "Moroccan Gnawa and Transglobal Trance: The Medium Is the Music," *Expedition Magazine* 46.1 (2004), 34.

<sup>25</sup> Christopher Witulski, 53.

colors. This latter marks the progression of the *Mluk* throughout the Lila ceremony.<sup>26</sup>

In fact, the sequential ordering of colors is designated by a pantheon of spirit possessors (Maisie Sum, 18). In addition to the colors, the *Mluk* are identifiable by their specific personalities and incenses. Morató expresses equivalently that "each spirit has its emblem and musical style, its colour and its particular smell, which is present thanks to the incense . . . All those who go into a trance are covered with a scarf in the colour of the spirit possessing them."<sup>27</sup>

Some claim that the Lila is referred to as the rite of the seven colors because seven set of spirits are invoked therein. However, there are more than seven families of *Mluk*; thirteen sets can be invoked (see Fig.4). On one hand, the male spirits are referred to as *Sidi*, *Mulay*, or *Basha* in the case of *Basha Hammu*. This latter is regarded as the most dangerous and violent spirit because of his extreme penchant for blood. In fact, he is the master of slaughterhouses and has a close relation with butchers. Therefore, whoever is inhabited by *Basha Hammu* must either sacrifice an animal or shed one's own blood.<sup>28</sup> Kamal argues that, at the height of the trance, one may repeatedly slash away at one's forearm with a butcher's knife or any sharp instrument.<sup>29</sup> As for the female spirits, they are referred to as *Lalla*. The main female spirits are Lalla Mira, Lalla Malika, and Lalla Aicha. This latter is believed to be the most powerful, inasmuch as it inhabits mostly men. The culmination of the ceremony resides in the bloodletting and slaughtering of the sacrifice. Thereby, a scrutiny of the different acts practiced during this sacrificial rite is of considerable significance.

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<sup>26</sup> Timothy D. Fuson, "The Gnawa and their Lila: An Afro-Maghrebi Ritual Tradition."

<sup>27</sup> Elena Morató, 193.

<sup>28</sup> Oussama Benayad, 50.

<sup>29</sup> Kamal Feriali, 63.

| Mluk                            | Color               | Description  |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|--|
| <i>Al-Hawsawiyya</i> (الحوصيون) |                     |  |
| Shurfa (شورفة)                  | White               | Noble, descendent of the Prophet                         |
| Al-Kuhl (الكوحل)                | Black               | Powerful, self-mutilating during layla                   |
| Sidi Musa (سيدي موسى)           | Blue                | Moses, use of water during possession                    |
| Sidi Hamu (سيد الحمو)           | Red                 | The maskun passes around a red drink after trancing      |
| Al-Buhala (البوهالا)            | Green               | Crazy  |
| Mulay Ibrahim (ملاي ابراهيم)    | Multicolored        | Abraham, quilted clothing of many colors together        |
| Al-Ghabi (الغابي)               | Brown               | Stupid or slow, holds candles close to face and clothing |
|                                 |                     |  |
| <i>Al-nsa' (Women)</i> (النساء) |                     |  |
| Lalla Malika (للة مليكة)        | Purple (from China) | Loves to dance   |
| Lalla Rqiya (للة رقية)          | Brown               |  |
| Lalla Mira (للة ميري)           | Yellow              |  |
| Lalla 'Aisha (للة عيشة)         | Black               | Powerful   |

Figure 4: A table presenting the Gnawa *Mluks*.<sup>30</sup>

### 3. Blood Sacrifice

The underlying reason behind the paramountcy of blood sacrifice in the Lila ceremony lies in the spirits' earnest fondness of slaughter, and especially the sacrifices bestowed upon them. The sacrificial rite and the burning of incenses are the main trance induction. Many believe that the Gnawa healing ceremonies serve exorcising the spirits. However, unlike this common belief, the spirits are involved with the inhabited people in close relationships which require holding the ceremonies where sacrifices take place.<sup>31</sup> In order for the sacrifice to be approved by the spirits, prior to its slaughter, it must be purified. In this respect, Benayad claims that the sacrifice has to undergo a ritual similar to the Islamic ablution (48). Besides

<sup>30</sup> In Christopher Witulski, 62.

<sup>31</sup> Christopher Witulski, "Crossing Paths: Musical and Ritual Interactivity between the Hamadsha and Gnawa in Sidi Ali, Morocco." *Yale Journal of Music and Religion* 2.2 (2016), 184.

the latter, Al Amrani claims that the sacrifice has to be given milk and sprinkled with flower distill before the slaughtering (55). This sacrificial rite marks the transition from the temporal realm to the spiritual one. In this vein, Benayad argues that:

[T]he very act of sacrifice is the marker of the transition from . . . "the self that is inhabited" to the "inhabited or possessed self." In being inhabited, there is a sense of dual personality . . . [B]y naming one's possessing spirit to be one of Lmluk, there is born a dichotomy between the Self and the Other. . . This Other, hence, is an admixture of the Self and the spirit, and is awakened merely through sacrifice and trance.<sup>32</sup>

The transition, indeed, brings out the spirit inhabiting the person, inasmuch as the line between the Self and the spirit becomes opaque, if not inexistent. The transition is inextricably related to the sacrificial rite because this latter placate the spirits. In fact, amidst the trance, the musical performances, and the sacrificial rites, the relation between the Self and the spirit grows stronger. In his article "The Gnawa and their Lila," Timothy states that "the ritual enables participants to enter the trance state . . . in which they may perform startling and sometimes spectacular dances. It is by means of these dances that participants negotiate their relationships with the mluk either placating them . . . or strengthening an existing relationship."<sup>33</sup> Deborah kapchan displays in her book *Traveling Spirit Masters* an illustration of these negotiations:

When the music stops, the possessed woman once again falls, this time backward into the arms of the mqaddema who begins to speak with the possessing jinn . . . . "Do you want a sacrifice?" The girl's head nods a barely perceptible "yes." "Who are you?" the mqaddema continues, "Who

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<sup>32</sup> Oussama Benayad, 51, 52.

<sup>33</sup> Timothy D. Fuson, 2.



are you? Are you Aisha [Qandisha]?" Another affirmative nod from a head with glazed eyes, vision unfixed . . . [sic]<sup>34</sup>

The Lila ceremony of Gnawa has always been an inspiration for other Moroccan mystic brotherhoods. In fact, its use of blood is not an exclusive matter, inasmuch as blood sacrifice is also practiced among other sects.

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<sup>34</sup> Deborah Kapchan, *Traveling Spirit Masters* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2007): 72.

## Chapter IV: Sainthood and Blood Offering: The Hamadsha as a Case Study

Moroccan witchcraft is closely related to sainthood, inasmuch as the populace engages in spiritual rites for the sake of earning saints' blessing. Moroccans highly venerate the Saint which is clearly demonstrated in the great number of saints' shrines all over the country. Paradoxically, having lived a religious and devotional life, saints, however, are associated with the blasphemous acts of witchcraft wherein people misbelieve the strength of Allah so as they feel the urge to insert a mediator. In fact, they consider the saint not only a mediator between them and God, but he is per se a source of power and blessing. Moroccans gather in annual pilgrimages to perform their witchcraft rituals which necessitate bloodletting being the main sacrifice for the saints and the spirits. Many brotherhoods take part in these pilgrimages at the top of whom the Hamadsha brotherhood prevails.

### A. Sainthood in Morocco

Sainthood is an integral part of Moroccan culture. It is strongly present inasmuch as there are multiple saints' shrines all over the country. Sainthood and Sufism, mystical strains of Islam, date back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, Sufi brotherhoods emerged as groups of pious individuals who led a simple lifestyle and devoted themselves to God as they interceded between humans and the divine. Their holiness peaked after their death and they became sacred saints highly venerated and regularly visited.<sup>1</sup> In his book *Ritual and Belief*, Westermarck argues that the traditions and beliefs associated with the saints in Morocco are not Islamic but rather stem from earlier paganism.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the latter as well as earlier animism contributed in the reinforcement and strengthening of the phenomenon of

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<sup>1</sup> Debra Stein, "Views of Mental Illness in Morocco: Western Medicine Meets the Traditional Symbolic," *Cmaj* 163.11 (2000), 1469.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Mohamed Chtatou, "Timeless Belief in Saints and Spirits in Morocco," Web.

sainthood, as being closely correlated to the realm of spirits and witchcraft rituals. In this vein, Njoku claims that, in Islam, there is a fine and blurry line between the sacred and the profane. To reach the ultimate essence of life that is pleasing Allah and attaining the reward of paradise, people resort to both sacred and blasphemous practices.<sup>3</sup> Some Berber-Arabs claim that seven pilgrimages to the shrine of a saint equate a pilgrimage to Mecca (Njoku, 32). According to Ezroua, the Moroccan populace has the drive towards sainthood entrenched in its unconscious character and psyche.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, a notable representation of the persona of the Saint is to be scrutinized in order to understand on which grounds the relationship between the saints and their visitors is abundantly significant in the Moroccans' view.

### **1. Representation of the Saint in Morocco**

Believed to be endowed with divine blessing, Moroccan saints are highly venerated by the Moroccan populace. In Morocco, several overlapping labels are attributed to the saint, namely *Marabout*, *Sheikh*, *Wali*, and *Shareef*.<sup>5</sup> Whatsoever the label used, the saint remains regarded as the mediator between people and God, and with whom Moroccans have a strong attachment. This attachment stems predominately from the belief that saints are granted a divine blessing, also referred to as *Baraka*. By virtue of this latter, Njoku argues that "it is common for individuals troubled with various forms of hardships and tragedies . . . to visit the tombs of the local saints to ask for their special blessings and intercessions" (Raphael Njoku, 31). Owing to their exceptional righteousness that they were known for in their lifetime, the saints are held at a higher status in society and so are their shrines and the villages where they are buried. Therefore, respect must be paid and shown

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<sup>3</sup> Raphael Chijioke Njoku, *Culture and Customs of Morocco* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2006), 22.

<sup>4</sup> Mohammed Ezroua, "Translating Muslim Sainthood to Western Audiences: Constructing Subjectivities in Moroccan Religious Culture," 6.

<sup>5</sup> Mohammed Ezroua, 14.

by following certain rituals and making offerings.<sup>6</sup> In the view of Moroccans, saints have more than one quality. They may have lineage with the prophet Muhammed, they may have been highly religious and virtuous throughout their lifetime, or else they may have mastery over malevolent spirits. Each of the qualities is accompanied with their being endowed with *Baraka*, which -in turn- endows their shrines and descendants with curative powers.<sup>7</sup>

Examining the representation of Moroccan saints entails pointing out the fact that it has been impacted by some Western writers in their travel literature about Morocco. As Ezroua argues, this impact is considered "a form of translating the native culture through a foreign medium for an outsider audience; thus carrying a number of ideological political implications that are neither neutral nor innocent."<sup>8</sup> In this respect, Njoku confirms the change that saintly veneration has been subject to. In his book *Culture and Customs of Morocco*, he claims that it "has witnessed a long-term decline in the cities, probably because of the increasing impact of Western education and influence, the general secularization of life, and the greater tendency toward orthodoxy among reform-minded city dwellers."<sup>9</sup> Notwithstanding all the writings about Moroccan saints, they remain strongly attached to the populace holding an unshakable relationship with them through various witchcraft rituals it engages in.

## **2. The Relation between Saints and Visitors**

The significant number of occasions wherein witchcraft rituals are practiced and saints are offered sacrifices and donations emphasizes their position of superiority in the Moroccan society. The relation between the saints and their visitors is based upon exigency and

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<sup>6</sup> Moundir Al Amrani, "Significance of Blood in Religion and Magic Rituals in Morocco," 54.

<sup>7</sup> Oussama Benayad, "Animal Sacrifice in Morocco," 59,60.

<sup>8</sup> Mohammed Ezroua, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Raphael Njoku, 31.

expectations. Properly speaking, each visitor contemplates certain urges which he/she expects the saint to bring to completion when engaging in the work of witchcraft. In this vein, Maarouf claims that resorting to the miraculous force of the saints emanates from the visitors' urge to both resist and escape the social, political, and economic injuries; they seek mythic justice due to its lack in their social world. According to them, justice is deemed an "occult gift" that is associated with the unidentified power of saints and spirits who possess the miracle to attain it.<sup>10</sup> As a recompense, several rituals are supposed to be performed upon entering the shrine of a given saint. Al Amrani claims that two of the main steps are lighting candles and making donations (54). Besides, the visitor is expected to circumambulate the saint's tomb while reiterate the formula: *ana bi-llah u shra'ah wali allah*; it means literally: I am with God and His law, O saint of God.<sup>11</sup> According to Hart, a saint's reputation rests on the miracles he can perform by interceding with God as a result of his granted *Baraka*. This latter is regarded as an ambivalent force, for it can heal but also punish and destroy.<sup>12</sup> People can bestow upon the saints blood sacrifices and await their *Baraka*, or they can promise the sacrifices to be offered once their desires get fulfilled.<sup>13</sup> However, one should be keenly mindful of the saints' seriousness which lies in their ability to be as malevolent as the evil spirits. Thereby, if one does not fulfill one's promise to a given saint, this latter is believed to engender calamities and severe diseases.<sup>14</sup> Taking into account the above, it is important to explore the contemporary condition of sainthood in Morocco.

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<sup>10</sup> Mohammed maarouf, "Saints and Social Justice in Morocco: An Ethnographic Case of the Mythic Court of Sidi Samharūš," *Arabica* 57 (2010), 591.

<sup>11</sup> David M. Hart, "Magic, Witchcraft and Sorcery in Morocco: The Sociology of Evans-Pritchard and the Ethnography of Mustapha Akhmisse, M. D." *Bulletin (British Society for Middle Eastern Studies)* 14.2 (1987), 188.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 188.

<sup>13</sup> Oussama Benayad, 62.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 63.

### 3. Moroccan Sainthood Today

The pre-Islamic indigenous belief systems and practices have mingled with the tenets of Islam and have given birth to a unique version of this religion referred to as the Moroccan Islam.<sup>15</sup> This latter has been emphasized in anthropological writings as being a conglomerate of religious practices, spiritual beliefs, and witchcraft rituals. Therefore, as Mohamed Chtatou argues, Moroccans have never ceased celebrating saints and spirits despite the increasing modernization and industrialization of the country. They have preserved holy places and kept observing some mystical practices to avoid the wrath of spirits.<sup>16</sup> By way of illustration, the topographical distribution of saints across the country brings to light the extent to which their symbolic power still has a grip on the minds and consciousness of the majority of people.<sup>17</sup> In this vein, Aziz Hlaoua, a Moroccan sociologist, argues that there has been a lucid revival of Sufism and saintly veneration under the reign of King Mohammed VI.<sup>18</sup> In fact, this revival has resulted from the contribution of media in propagating the mystical practices of some Sufi brotherhoods. In this respect, Ezroua argues that:

Saintliness as an ideal mode of conduct is often propagated by the media . . . when showing e.g. government officials and political leaders paying visits to saints or religious figures . . . Upon visiting the saints' shrines, rich donations are offered to the saints and his descendants. This is one of the strongest forms of legitimating the saint.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, mediatizing the sacred figures leads to their legitimacy and approval as well as that of their witchcraft and spiritual ceremonies within the social fabric. In previous

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<sup>15</sup> Raphael Njoku, 25.

<sup>16</sup> Mohamed Chtatou, "Timeless Belief in Saints and Spirits in Morocco," Web.

<sup>17</sup> Mohammed Ezroua, 7.

<sup>18</sup> Cited in "Sorcery, Spirits and Sacrifice at Moroccan Sufi Festival," (27 January 2014), web.

<sup>19</sup> Mohammed Ezroua, 5.

years, photography amidst the sacred sites was not permissible. However, some people managed to take short video clips and disseminated them among the population.

Additionally, Zillinger claims that some adepts of several brotherhoods preserved recordings of their trance rituals and circulated them among selected members of their mystic group or family.<sup>20</sup> This circulation of recordings can be attributable to the fact that the brotherhoods resist their marginalized status quo and aspire to thwart forgetfulness from establishing its hegemony and, with that, their history to vanish. Among these brotherhoods, the Hamadsha allowed the cameras into their ceremonies, insofar as they became in the foreground of the Moroccan news.

### **B. The Hamadsha Brotherhood**

The Hamadsha is a mystical brotherhood that amalgamates religious practices, such as praising God and the Prophet, with witchcraft rituals of healing from spirit possession. This latter is considered their ultimate purpose besides healing other mental and physical diseases. The origins of the Hamadsha trace back to two founding saints who are associated with a female spirit who is Lalla Aicha. She is a highly venerated spirit among superstitious beliefs in Morocco. Moroccans' destination to visit them is an annual pilgrimage referred to as Sidi Ali pilgrimage. The rituals practiced during this ceremony go from candles lighting and gifts giving to "head-slashing" and "self-mutilation". The violent practices are attributable to the brotherhood spirits' request of bloodletting.<sup>21</sup> The blood sacrifices are, thus, bestowed upon both the spirits and the founding saints of the brotherhood. Their curative capacities as well as their trance-evoking music rendered them widely known across the country and tirelessly visited.

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<sup>20</sup> Martin Zillinger, "Media and the Scaling of Ritual Spaces in Morocco," *Social Compass* 61.1 (2014), 42.

<sup>21</sup> Christopher Witulski, "Crossing Paths : Musical and Ritual Interactivity between the Hamadsha and Gnawa in Sidi Ali, Morocco," *Yale Journal of Music and Religion* 2.2 (2016), 178,181.

## 1. Historical Background of the Hamadsha

The founding saints of the Hamadsha brotherhood are Sidi Ali Ben Hamdush and Sidi Ahmed Dghughi. If legendary narratives can be trusted, they date from the 18<sup>th</sup> century and rest in sanctuaries adjacent to Zerhoun Mountains in the region of Meknes. Both shrines have become major pilgrimage sites for people suffering from spirit possession and other diseases.<sup>22</sup> In fact, the Hamadsha comprises two distinct brotherhoods which are often confused and referred to interchangeably. They are the Allaliyyin, followers of Sidi Ali, and the Dghughiyyin, followers of Sidi Ahmed.<sup>23</sup> However, they are commonly known for the Hamadsha without distinction between the two saints. Historically, little is known about their lives, but the common knowledge is that Sidi Ali was extremely devotional, insofar as he spent ten years praying all night and fasting all day. As for Sidi Ahmed, he was either Sidi Ali's slave or pupil; accurate information are arcane.<sup>24</sup> Crapanzano states that the Hamadsha are "patrilineal" and "patrilocal". In other words, ancestry is traced through the male line, and the members should live in the same whereabouts as their ancestors.<sup>25</sup> Historically related to Islam, the brotherhood, nevertheless, do not aspire for union and communion with God as much as it does for devil-struck healing. They are closely associated with the realm of spirits. Notwithstanding their reputation for having efficient curative therapies, it is essential to mention that achieving a permanent cure is far-fetched. The patient receives ephemeral cures that need to be renewed through periodic performances of trance, also called *Jedba*, head-slashing, and animal blood-sacrificing.<sup>26</sup> These performances take place usually in the annual pilgrimage of Sidi Ali.

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<sup>22</sup> Martin Zillinger, 41.

<sup>23</sup> Vincent Crapanzano, *The Hamadsha: A Study in Moroccan Ethnopsychiatry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 3.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 229.



## 2. Sidi Ali Pilgrimage

The Moroccan landscape is replete with holy sites wherein several highly venerated saints rest. Mohamed Chtatou refers to the veneration of the saint and its burial as *Maraboutism*. This phenomenon comes to light mostly in annual Moussems such as that of Sidi Ali. In this vein, Rick Love argues that *Moussems* are “occultic fairs” where people gather to take part in the journey into the supernatural world, to offer blood sacrifices, to lessen mental diseases, and to receive *Baraka*.<sup>27</sup> Sidi Ali pilgrimage venerates not only the founding saints of the Hamadsha brotherhood, but also Lalla Aicha who is believed to be a mythical Moroccan princess and a powerful unseen force.<sup>28</sup> In present-day Morocco, people are absorbed by the unseen realm, inasmuch as Sidi Ali pilgrimage still hosts a great number of people whose ultimate objective is earning saints’ Baraka, believing it would bring about miraculous achievements. The pilgrimage hosts, in addition, members of families and friends whose aim is not seeking cures but simply enjoying the aesthetics of the musical opus of the Hamadsha sect.

It is essential to point out the fact that Sidi Ali pilgrimage is visited by other brotherhoods such as Gnawa and Aissawa. As a result, Hamadsha borrowed other groups’ spirits which marked a paradigm shift in their witchcraft procedures. Gnawa, on the other hand, borrowed one of Hamadsha’s poems which is that of *Aisha Hamdsushia* in order to satisfy the pilgrimage visitors. Because of this interchange, the trance became similar in both sects as it ends with Lalla Aisha’s control over the trance bodies.<sup>29</sup> The exchange of music led both sects to make a palpable leap in the Moroccan popular music as they went

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<sup>27</sup> Rick Love, “Power Encounter among Folk Muslims: An Essential Key of the Kingdom,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 13.4 (1996), 193.

<sup>28</sup> “Sorcery, Spirits and Sacrifice at Moroccan Sufi Festival,” (27 January 2014), web.

<sup>29</sup> Christopher Witulski, “Crossing Paths,” 191,192.

from being ostracized into becoming the center of famous festivals. The discussion about Sidi Ali pilgrimage, hitherto, necessitates tackling the different rituals performed therein.

### 3. Healing rituals of the Hamadsha

The Hamadsha hold a healing ceremony akin to that of the Gnawa sect wherein blood sacrifice is crucial; it is also referred to as a Lila. It serves healing severe health issues that are the result of a relationship with one spirit or more.

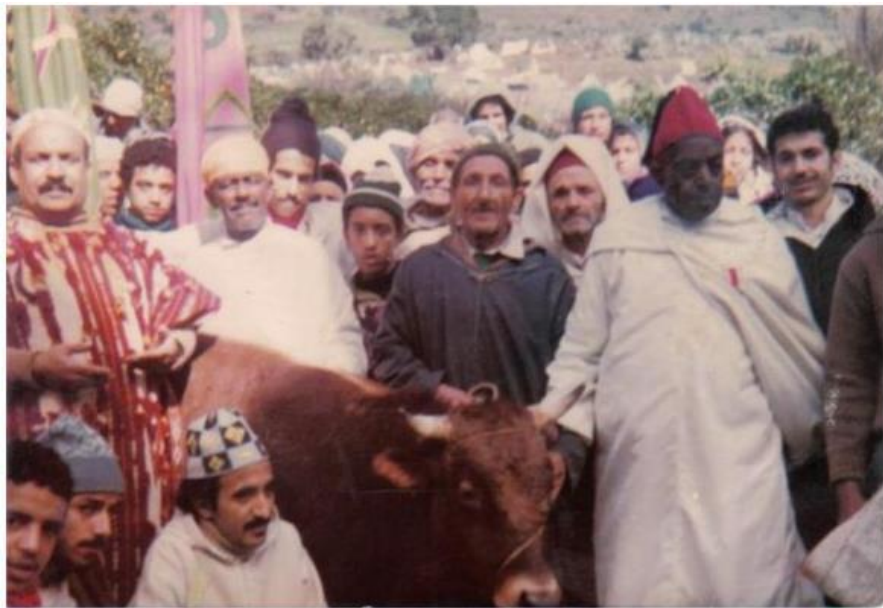


Figure 1: The Hamadsha of Fes with a bull as a sacrifice for the ceremony (1968).<sup>30</sup>

In his review of *The Hamadsha*, William Brickman claims that the curing séance dramatizes the illness, inasmuch as trances and ecstatic behaviors culminate in self-mutilating and bloodletting.<sup>31</sup> The witchcraft ceremony starts by the procession of the musicians who play on their instruments loudly enough to allow the trance to begin earlier than it should. They start by reciting the *Hizb*, which is a collection of music known among the Muslim population as well as the Hamadsha specific sung poems. The direction of the Lila shifts as the trance begins, inasmuch as the evoking of the spirits ensues. When one

<sup>30</sup> In Oussama Benayad, 54.

<sup>31</sup> William Brickman, Review of *The Hamadsha* by Vincent Crapanzano, 141.

goes through it, one becomes oblivious to one's surroundings, and moves on hands and knees dragging one's body along the ground. Therefore, the musicians draw near the place of the trance aiming to escalate the music and the capacity of healing.<sup>32</sup> Unlike Gnawa, the Hamadsha perform more violent rituals alongside the wild dances and frenetic trances. They drink boiling water, eat spiny cactus and other defilement, charm poisonous snakes, and slash their scalps and bodies.<sup>33</sup> Others reach the point of killing and devouring live animals with bare hands.<sup>34</sup> As for the veneration of Lalla Aisha, visitors tend to light candles and lead the way towards her cavern near Sidi Ali's tomb. Besides the urge to cure illness, the visitors aspire for a better social world that is relieved from tension and conflict. They regard the saints and spirits as the requisite forces which are capable of fulfilling their urges and implementing social justice and welfare.<sup>35</sup> Apart from saintly veneration, another instance of blood sacrifice occurs in the treasure hunting rituals.

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<sup>32</sup> Christopher Witulski, "Crossing Paths," 181-83.

<sup>33</sup> Vincent Crapanzano, *The Hamadsha*, 3.

<sup>34</sup> Rick Love, 193.

<sup>35</sup> Mohammed Maarouf, 589.

## Chapter V: Blood and Treasure Hunters: The Tragedy of the Zouhri Children

Sacrifice in treasure hunting is incorporated among witchcraft practices wherein blood plays a pivotal role. A great number of treasures are believed to be buried in certain lands guided by a set of spirits. Only the blood of a so-called Zouhri child has power to disclose the location of these treasures. Due to the latter, treasure hunters engage in witchcraft practices wherein sacrificing Zouhri children and bestowing upon the spirits their mysterious and powerful blood is deemed indispensable.

### A. The Zouhri Children Legend

According to the sociologist Ahmed Al Motamassik, above 86% of Moroccans attach great importance to the potency of witchcraft.<sup>1</sup> In fact, amidst all the legends they believe in, which are closely correlated to witchcraft and the realm of spirits, the legend of the Zouhri children is subsumed. The name *Zouhri* is attributed to a child who is unique for certain physical peculiarities. He/she is believed to possess the powers to unveil the whereabouts of buried treasures. Unlike ordinary children, a Zouhri's blood is deemed golden and rare, inasmuch as it is bestowed upon the guardian spirits to disclose the treasures' location.<sup>2</sup> Lasri claims that "believing in the unknown and acknowledging the unreal are two conventional values in Morocco."<sup>3</sup> In this respect, Agassi and Jarvi argue that, "to be more precise, it is generally believed that the act of believing in a belief, or of holding on to a belief, may or may not be rational."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the surmise that a Zouhri's blood is paramount to find hidden treasures is merely a *prima facie* case of irrationality,

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Ayoub Lasri, "Morocco and the Deathly Hallows," Web.

<sup>2</sup> Youssef Sourgo, "Zouhri Children and Witchcraft: Morocco's Darkest Beliefs," Web.

<sup>3</sup> Ayoub lasri, Web.

<sup>4</sup> J. Agassi and I. C. Jarvi, "Magic and Rationality Again," *The British Journal of Sociology* 24.2 (1973), 236.

inasmuch as the belief is groundless. Understanding further the essence of the legend requires an examination of the typical features of these children.

### **1. The Characteristics of a Zouhri Child**

The so-called Zouhris have specific features that distinguish them from common children. Their blood, which is lighter in color<sup>5</sup>, is the most essential substance in their bodies, inasmuch as it serves as a sacrifice for the guardian spirits of the treasures. They are usually under the age of ten, and could be either a boy or a girl. An obvious line intersects their hands' palms horizontally, as well as their tongue lengthwise.



Figure 1: A continuous line crossing the hand palm<sup>6</sup>

As for their eyes, they are usually myopic with a slight squint. Apart from their vision disorder, there is an apparent shimmering one can notice in their eyes,<sup>7</sup> as well as their being slightly dissymmetrical. In addition, a Zouhri child has usually blonde hair.<sup>8</sup> Some of these features can be regarded by ordinary people as mere physical differences. However, sorcerers and treasure hunters who believe in the legend at hand consider them as signs of luck which will lead them towards wealth. A Zouhri child might not have all these features,

<sup>5</sup> "Zouhri Child: Key of Hidden Treasures," Web.

<sup>6</sup> See [www.reddit.com/r/mildlyinteresting/comments/6k58ul/i\\_have\\_a\\_single\\_line\\_across\\_my\\_palm/](https://www.reddit.com/r/mildlyinteresting/comments/6k58ul/i_have_a_single_line_across_my_palm/)

<sup>7</sup> "Zouhri Child: Key of Hidden Treasures," Web.

<sup>8</sup> Youssef Sourgo, Web.

but the more signs in their bodies, the stronger abilities they possess.<sup>9</sup> Be that as it may, the blood of these children remains the sorcerers' main target to reach the buried treasures.

## **2. Their Significance in Witchcraft Rituals**

In his book *Magical Beliefs and Rituals in Morocco*, Mostafa Aarab argues that the distinctive characteristics of a Zouhri child evince that he/she is a hybrid of a Jinn and a human.<sup>10</sup> In fact, Al Amrani claims that the Zouhri's mother got impregnated by Jinn instead of her husband, for this latter did not utter Allah's name before the intercourse.<sup>11</sup> In another version of the legend, it is believed that the child is indeed an original Jinn whose parents replaced him with a human during his birth.<sup>12</sup> By and large, the child remains valuable to find buried treasures because of his relation to the spirits. In fact, sorcerers and treasure hunters use these children as a medium to unveil the treasure's location without being harmed or cursed by the guardian spirits.<sup>13</sup> The paramountcy of Zouhri children for treasure hunters can be deduced from the origin of the word.

In the Moroccan dialect, "Zouhri" word is derived from "Zahri", which means "dice" in classical Arabic, obviously referring to "luck" . . . The origins of the word may also have been associated with Venus, which is called "Zahra" in Arabic and is related to Zodiac and fortune and luck. In any case, in the Moroccan popular culture, "Zouhri" means a person who is most fortunate because . . . God [Has] chosen him among millions to carry the torch of luck in the paths of life. [sic]<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> "Zouhri Child: Key of Hidden Treasures," Web.

<sup>10</sup> Youssef Assadi, "Claims of Abduction Involving So-called Zouhri Children," *ISIClick* (June 2015), 31.

<sup>11</sup> Moundir Al Amrani, "Significance of Blood in Religion and Magic Rituals in Morocco," 56.

<sup>12</sup> "Zouhri Child: Key of Hidden Treasures," Web.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

Treasure hunters, therefore, do not dare seeking buried fortunes without utter readiness to sacrifice the blood of a Zouhri child. This latter brings them luck so as they would not be prone to the spirits' curse which results in death or, as the legend says, being dragged to the Jinn's world where they will vanish.<sup>15</sup> Innocent children are, thus, exploited by these hunters out of sheer greed.

## **B. Zouhri's Exploitation by Treasure Hunters**

The buried treasures which the hunters use all possible means to discover are believed to be guarded by a set of spirits. To unveil the treasures' location, these spirits dictate some demands amongst which sacrificing the blood of a Zouhri child prevails. Without a second thought, the treasure hunters abduct blameless children and jeopardize their lives for their own benefit. They make use of them in witchcraft rituals wherein the child, if not murdered, is asked to hold an amulet and stroll where the treasure is potentially buried. Once the child stumbles, the place is dug up believing it is the right place.<sup>16</sup> According to Sourgou, the "impingements" of children abduction and murdering burden weightily a society that is longing for advancement and growth.<sup>17</sup> It is essential then to examine where these treasures originate from.

### **1. Buried treasures: The hunters' target**

It is widely acknowledged that, in the old times, Moroccans were accustomed to bury their valuables to ensure their safety. According to Abdul Haq Zaydi, burying precious assets peaked "after the collapse of the Almohad Caliphate." In fact, the country, at that time, underwent periods of chaotic turmoil when insecurity reigned supreme.<sup>18</sup> In this respect, Iyyad Abelal argues that the Moroccan people's unconscious leads them towards believing

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<sup>15</sup> "Indigo Children and Zouhri Children", Web.

<sup>16</sup> Youssef Sourgo, Web.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Cited in Hassan Al-Ashraf, "The Dark World of Morocco's Treasure Hunters," Web.

that, being buried under the ground, these treasures become the property of the Jinn as well.<sup>19</sup> Treasure hunters emerged, therefore, blinded with their dream of wealth and an abundance possession of valuables. Through witchcraft rituals, they ventured concerning themselves with the spirits, insofar as they proffered them sacrificial children. Even though treasure hunting is an illegal trade in Morocco, sorcerers and charlatans became mindlessly plagued with it.<sup>20</sup> In fact, at any expense, they deploy all means to “get their hands on the immeasurable treasures.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the general consensus among Moroccans is that these treasure hunters are the first suspect on the issue of myriad of enigmatical instances of abduction and murdering of children.<sup>22</sup> It is, consequently, essential to bring to light some of the cases of children abduction which do nothing but heighten the parents’ dread that their children would be the next victims.

## **2. Fear of Children Abduction**

The greatest fear of Zouhri’s parents is the abduction of their children. “Do not show you palms to a stranger”<sup>23</sup> is the oft-repeated warning children, whose traits of being Zouhri are conspicuous, hear the most. They live in a constant alert so as not to fall victim of an alien hold. These children are inhibited from enjoying their infantile rights, inasmuch as they are prevented from leaving their houses and playing with their peers. In this respect, Youssef Assadi claims that some families are indeed strictly enjoining their Zouhri children not to play outwards or to go to school by their own.<sup>24</sup> Above the latter, the children undergo a troubled psychiatric condition and are swayed by a permanent interior tension.

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<sup>19</sup> Cited in Youssef Assadi, 31.

<sup>20</sup> Hassan Al-Ashraf, Web.

<sup>21</sup> Youssef Sourgo, Web.

<sup>22</sup> Moundir Al Amrani, 56.

<sup>23</sup> Ayoub Lasri, Web.

<sup>24</sup> Youssef Assadi, 31.



In his article, Assadi cites a testimony of a Zouhri child's aunt apropos an unsuccessful attempt of his abduction:

Hakima Elmterfi, 39, lives in a village called Sbaâ Rouadi near Fes, and recalls the dangers she says her nephew Mohammed encountered. When he was 11 years old, Elmterfi says strangers tried to kidnap the boy by forcing him into a car. She says his father intervened. "Only at that time did we find out that Mohamed had been chased by strangers because he was Zouhri," . . . [H]is grandfather decided to escort him to and from school, while his mother rarely let him play outside the house. "All this atmosphere of prudence and heavy guard kept him in fear . . ." says his brother, Ahmed Almterfi.<sup>25</sup>

The case above is similar to that of many other children whose life is burdened because of their believed-to-be-miraculous blood. Similarly, Zouhair Eddaoui, a Zouhri child, says: "My mother noticed that there is a line across my hand and prevented me from going out a lot, telling people that I am a Zouhri."<sup>26</sup> The perpetual fear, therefore, weighs down both the children and their parents. Despite the reality of witchcraft practices, the Zouhri Children's legend might prove to be a mere figment of imagination. Notwithstanding the latter, the fear of abduction remains persistent throughout the ages.

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<sup>25</sup> Youssef Assadi, 31.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

This monograph has been concerned with a discussion of the significance of blood in the Moroccan witchcraft rituals. It, first, ventured to display a brief historical background of witchcraft in Moroccan culture, and showed its relation to blood. This latter, despite being forbidden by Islam, occupies a vital position in the world of witchcraft in Morocco. It, then, proceeded to broach three illustrations that have not been appreciably dived into by scholarships, for they touch upon sensitive concerns in the Moroccan social fabric. It has addressed, among a multitude, the cases of Gnawa, Hamadsha, and Treasure Hunters. They have in common the sacrificial rites whereby they bestow blood upon the supernatural entities for different purposes. In fact, they are notorious for their witchcraft practices that vacillate between being banned and allowed so as one finds it challenging to discern their legitimacy. While treasure hunting has always been outlawed, the spiritual acts performed amongst the Gnawa and Hamadsha sects seem to grow more legitimate since they are buttressed by the Moroccan Ministries of Culture and Tourism. The Gnawa have undertaken a path of representation of the identity of a group of slaves who succeeded in empowering themselves and recreating a territory of their own amidst Moroccan culture. They reestablished their own worth through integrating their music deeply into the populace preferences which rendered the latter capable of welcoming their witchcraft rituals all the same. As for the Hamadsha, they represent their ancestors' legacy which is associated with witchcraft practices mingled with religious ones. Treasure Hunters, on the other hand, are resultant from a blind belief in the Zouhri children legend which partakes in the Moroccan cultural myths.

The cases addressed in this monograph make lucid the nature of Moroccan culture, which is a conglomerate of pagan beliefs, Islamic assumptions and transmitted myths. Unlike what was hoped, the coming of Islam did not thwart practicing witchcraft or

associating with the spirits. It, however, added to the complex nature of Moroccan identity. Moroccans remained attached to the idea of sacrificing blood to appease the spirits, insofar as the occasions wherein sacrificial rites take place are numerous. Attempting to form a clear vision regarding what lies underneath the façade of blood sacrifice in Morocco paves the way towards deriving the incentives because of which the practice occupies such a pivotal position. In fact, Moroccan cultural and religious aspects give rise to similar practices wherein the sacred and the profane merge so as people no longer distinguish to whom sanctification and devotion are to be dedicated.

The monograph's attempt to discuss blood in Moroccan witchcraft practices is far from being exhaustive. Being only a rough outline to the issue, the present work, it is highly aspired, will buttress future research to tackle a number of points that have remained opaque in the present attempt. Had it been given more time, this monograph could have presented evidences from visits to the places where sacrificial rites and witchcraft practices take place. This could have included a visit to a Gnawa Lila wherein interviews with major members of the sect could have been carried out. It could have also incorporated evidences from a visit to the Sidi Ali's shrine in Meknes wherein detailed procedures of witchcraft and sacrifices could have been disclosed. All the above could have been perspective-changing, inasmuch as it could have adduced additional views apropos the different incentives that prompt the practices at hand. Diving further into the reconfigurations that these practices are constantly subject to lays the groundwork for not only an investigation of the present-day Moroccan cultural ethos, but also a future vision of the religious, societal, and cultural life in the country.

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